

The University of Chicago

THE SWEDES OF CHICAGO

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE
SOCIAL SCIENCES IN CANDIDACY FOR THE
DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY
AUGUST, 1940

By
GUSTAV ELWOOD JOHNSON

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

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The purpose of this study is to present the significant features in the assimilation of the Swedes into the life of an American city, tracing their adaptation to a growing urbanism almost from the beginning of Chicago. The first Swede Oscar G. Lange came in 1838 when Chicago was a town of 4,066 and only five years after a town government had been established.

One of the most important of the agencies which furthered adjustments of the Swedes to new conditions and at the same time preserved an ethnic consciousness was the Swedish-American press. Hemlandet was established in 1858 and since then Chicago has been the center of Swedish newspapers in America--political, religious, fraternal and general. Besides Hemlandet, Svenska-Amerikanaren and Svenska-Tribunen founded in 1877, were probably the most influential of all journals. They and others of their kind became the medium by which Swedish opinion on matters of general interest was made known. The government at Washington, at the state capitol, and in the City Hall is passed upon in editorial comment and news reports; wars in which America participated and those in which European nationals played the chief role are condoned or condemned. The problems of immigration and the attitude of Americans to them are considered in the light of the Swede in America, and purely personal and domestic items are set in contrast to those which related to the homeland. Some newspapers were interested to a greater degree than were others in social movements or reforms. Justitia, in 1871, carried on a struggle against unscrupulous immigrant agents who sought to prey upon the many newly arrived

Swedish immigrants in Chicago. As a result of its campaign, these agents were forced to cease their nefarious activities. Other newspapers, notably Svenska-Tribunen, showed great interest in the establishment of an eight-hour day for workers and also urged the adoption of a workingmen's compensation law for Illinois in the 1890's. Sändebudet was interested in the temperance movement. But all, despite special points of view, exercised an extensive influence in the molding of public opinion.

Most newspapers published in Chicago had a national circulation and printed local news of the main Swedish centers in the United States. One mission of the Swedish journals was to acquaint the immigrant with life in Chicago. Through news columns and advertisements the Swede soon learned where to seek work, find lodgings or buy his clothing. Frequently the advertisements directed the immigrant to business establishments where Swedish was spoken, and where his ignorance of the English language would not be an insurmountable handicap. Another function was to preserve a link between the immigrant and his homeland by printing local news from the various provinces of Sweden. In general, the press was a mixture of Chicago and foreign news, advertisements of railroads, immigrant companies, and general information. Most newspapers lacked an adequate news service, and many of their items were translated from the columns of contemporary American newspapers. News from Sweden appeared in the form of clippings from various newspapers of that country, and the average Chicago Swedish newspaper was not ready for publication until the weekly mail arrived. Most of these newspapers therefore were issued once each week.

Like other foreign elements in Chicago, the Swedes were interested in obtaining political preference for politically ambitious men of their blood. The Swedes maintained a general in-

terest in politics but they were, at times, insistent upon political recognition of their fellow nationals by place on the ballot or by special favors at the hands of successful politicians.

The desire for political preference led to attempts by the Swedes to organize political societies along ethnic lines. The first attempt to organize a political association came in 1879 and resulted in failure because one faction wanted the club to support any Swedish candidate, regardless of party, while another faction wanted to support the Republican party as the best chance of gaining political recognition. Permanent establishment of Swedish political clubs came in the 1890's when they were first organized in almost every part of the city. These clubs were, at first, mainly concerned with the naturalization of immigrant Swedes and with indoctrination into Republicanism. Usually the period of greatest activity on the part of the club came at the time of a campaign, when Swedes were urged to become naturalized so that they might vote in coming elections. These clubs were amalgamated into a central body known as the Swedish-American Republican Club of Cook County in 1892. That club in turn became, along with other Swedish political clubs in Illinois, the nucleus of the Swedish-American Republican League of Illinois, founded in 1894. With the organization of the League, the Swedes could and did demand political recognition.

One of the results of the participation of Swedes in Chicago politics was the rise of Swedish political leaders of considerable influence. Among these can be mentioned Frederick Lundin, John A. Swanson, and Charles S. Peterson. Such political leaders occasionally belonged to different political factions within the Republican party of Illinois, with the result that a group cohesiveness did not exist to the extent that being a Swede

meant that a candidate had the unfailing support of all Swedes. Like other Chicagoans the Swedes, at times, were disturbed at election frauds. In general as Republicans they held the Democrats responsible for all such political irregularities.

The church, as well as the press, kept alive ethnic kinships. A desire for religious freedom was a strong motive in the coming of the Swedes particularly in the early years. Many of the first immigrants to Chicago nursed a dislike and aversion for the Lutheran State Church of Sweden, and while accepting the tenets of Lutheranism, were determined to found congregations not on the apostolic tradition and ritual of the Church of Sweden, but on a congregational basis as developed by some American Protestant churches. The chief church, beside the Lutheran, to which the Swedes belonged was the Swedish Evangelical Mission Covenant Church. The Swedish Baptist and Methodist churches were few in number, and the organization of non-Lutheran congregations showed that not all Swedes were satisfied with the more ritualistic Lutheran Church. The Lutheran and Mission Covenant denominations formed their own general church bodies, while Baptists and the Methodists preferred to unite with the general American church bodies of these denominations.

A question that caused much discussion in the history of Swedish Lutheran congregations in Chicago was the establishment of parochial schools. Coming from a land where there was a close connection between the church and education, the Swedes at first considered educating their children in parochial schools under their own control. Pietistic parents wished to educate their children in the Lutheran creed and to prevent liberal ideas from changing the religious beliefs learned in the home. On the other hand, other parents who had been trained in Swedish Lutheranism

decided against parochial schools because they wanted their children to be educated as Americans.

Like the Swedes in other parts of America, those in Chicago, especially the Lutherans under the Augustana Synod, clung to the use of their own language and failed to accept English as the sole means of expression. After 1890 the right to organize English-speaking congregations was vested in the local Swedish congregations. This arrangement was considered necessary to prevent individuals from leaving a Swedish church in order to form English-speaking congregations within the Synod. In later years the usual method of a congregation in Chicago was to bridge the gap between English and Swedish by having two services on Sundays, one in the Swedish language and the other in English.

In the cultural life of Chicago the Swedes made contributions especially in music and painting. In literature, too, they added to the cosmopolitanism of the cultural pattern Chicago was designing through her varied immigrant groups and the original American settlers. The Swedish American Art Association, through its annual exhibition, made it possible for all to view the work of Swedish-American painters. Occasionally the artistic treasures of Sweden would also be shown. The first regularly constituted musical organization was the Immanuel Church Choir, organized in 1863. The first secular chorus was Freja Society, formed in 1869. From that time on, there were many such groups. Societies and lodges usually supported musical organizations, while traditional Swedish songs and instrumental music were kept alive by the Swedish provincial societies. The Swedish Choral Club eminent American critics have proclaimed one of the finest choral organizations in the nation. For many years one of the outstanding events of the winter music season in Chicago has been the Choral Club's rendi-

tion of Handel's "Messiah." In addition, Chicagoans had the opportunity of hearing the club present not only the standard oratorio repertoire but also the traditional choral music of Sweden.

Since they first came to Chicago, the Swedes have tended to congregate in certain localities. Their first settlement was on the near North Side and this locality was a favorite neighborhood for many years. By 1880-1884, when there was a great influx of Swedes to the city, they had spread throughout Chicago, although the North Division still held the greatest number. They were concentrated principally from Franklin Street on the south to Sedgewick on the north and Larrabee Avenue on the west. In the 1880's many sought new homes in the West Division, in an area bounded by Van Buren Street on the south, Grand Avenue on the north and Ashland Avenue on the west. In the South Division the main Swedish settlement was between Twenty-sixth Street on the south, Wentworth and Stewart avenues on the east and west, and Fourteenth Street on the north. In 1904 on the North Side, especially in the Belmont Avenue district and Lakeview, there was a large Swedish representation. Dispersion, however, had begun, and by that year twenty out of the thirty-five wards in Chicago had one thousand or more Swedes. By 1930 the Swedes were located throughout Chicago, but there were three well defined settlements on the North Side. One lay between Crawford and California avenues along the lines of Lawrence and Bryn Mawr avenues. Another was due east of that district between Halsted and Damen avenues. Further south, the old Swedish neighborhoods in the Belmont Avenue district still held a large number of Swedes.

The standard of living maintained by the Swedes was generally comparable to that maintained by native-Americans. Swedes ranked with the native-born of Chicago in earning the highest

wages paid in the city. The average family income was high. But more than the native-Americans the Swedes supplemented their incomes by the earnings of women and children. An excellent indication of a high standard of living is the amount of household space per family. Both the Swedes and the Americans had ample space in comparison with other nationalities, and less persons per household. The Swedes paid higher rents than the average of other foreign families and more often owned their homes.

This study is based upon a variety of sources, one of the most important of which was the Swedish newspaper--Svenska-Tribunen (later Svenska-Tribunen-Nyheter), Svenska Kuriren, Svenska-Amerikanaren, and Sändebudet. Other newspapers used extensively were the Chicago Democrat, the Chicago Daily Journal and the Chicago Daily Tribune. Much material was found in the Reports of the United States Bureau of the Census published decennially; Report of the United States Immigration Commission (1911) and the Report of the United States Industrial Commission (1901). The Chicago school census, published every other year from 1884 to 1914, was of great assistance in determining where the Swedes lived in Chicago. Memoirs, including those of Gustaf Unonius, Minnen af en sjuttonårig vistelse i nordvestra Amerika, and Eric Norelius' Early Life of Eric Norelius were used. Immigration letters gave an excellent portrayal of the struggles faced by Swedes during their first years in the United States. There is little secondary material upon which a writer may draw, but of that which is available the most important work is Ernest W. Olson (ed.), History of the Swedes of Illinois.

